



**Testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Highways and Transit**

“Transportation Challenges of Metropolitan Areas”

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Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Highways and Transit.

My name is Robert Yaro. I am president of Regional Plan Association (RPA), a private, independent planning organization for the New York-New Jersey-Connecticut Region. For more than 80 years, RPA has been shaping transportation systems, protecting open spaces, and promoting better community design for the region’s continued growth. RPA works in collaboration with the public, private, and civic sectors to advance long term plans for the region that support economic prosperity, a healthy environment, and quality of life.

While RPA's primary focus is on the NY-NJ-CT region, when necessary and appropriate RPA addresses national trends and policies. In the 1960s, for example, RPA led a national public education effort in support of creating the federal Urban Mass Transit Administration and its federal funding for transit systems across the country.

RPA is once again engaged in a national research and advocacy effort, this time focused on developing a strategy for the nation’s future growth. America 2050 is a national initiative based at RPA to develop an infrastructure investment plan for the United States that responds to the challenges of rapid population growth, climate change, and global economic competition. It is advised by a National Committee for America 2050 of civic and business leaders, regional planners, and public officials in the nation’s largest regions across the country.

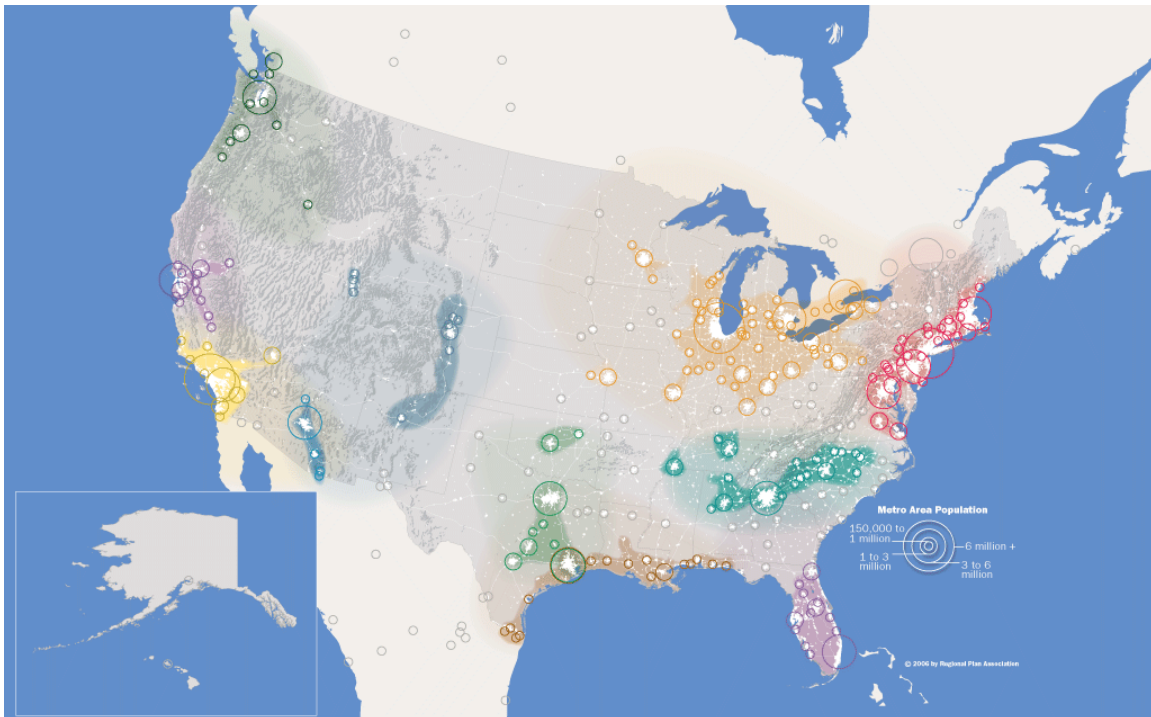
Since 2005, RPA has been working with its America 2050 partners to develop proposals for national transportation policy, with a focus on the unique needs of America’s metropolitan regions and megaregions. These places account for the bulk of America’s economic activity and will accommodate a majority of America’s population and

economic growth in the coming half century. It is essential that our national policy formulate specific strategies that support the growth and efficiency of America's densest and most congested places and give them the tools to compete effectively in the global economy. My testimony focuses specifically on how the unique needs of metropolitan regions and megaregions may be addressed in America's transportation policy.

Addressing the Transportation Needs of Metropolitan Areas

As you know, America's population passed the 300 million mark in late 2006 and continues to grow. According to the U.S. Census, our nation is expected to grow about 40 percent by mid-century, adding at least 120 million people by the year 2050.

RPA's analysis of land use trends indicates that most of the growth in this country will take place in metropolitan areas, and specifically, in ten or more "megaregions" -- large networks of urbanized areas like the Northeast Megaregion, which stretches from Boston to Washington, D.C. We consider these megaregions, places like Southern California, the Texas Triangle and the Arizona Sun Corridor, the new competitive units in the global economy. They are competing with the similarly-sized "global integration zones" of Europe and Southeast Asia, where tens of billions of dollars in investments have been made in high-speed rail and goods movement systems to support the highly-mobile workforce of the global economy.



Emerging Megaregions of the United States

If America is to compete internationally, accommodate rapid population growth, and preserve the quality of life and environment in its metropolitan regions, it must make dramatic investments in its metropolitan infrastructure systems. Much in the manner of

the Interstate Highway Act of the last century, our surface transportation policy must provide a bold framework for another half century of growth and development in America. In doing so it will need to accommodate population growth, move goods, and transition to alternative energy sources and transportation modes that can be supported by increased density.

Our national transportation policy is not currently “doing the job” of providing adequate financial resources, decision-making authority, flexibility, tools, and support systems to metropolitan regions to deal with the challenges of growing demand on their deteriorating roads and transit infrastructure. The growth in people, jobs, and wealth that is predicted in the coming century leaves these very large regions unable to provide for themselves within the current structure.

At the same time, the federal government is not asking enough in terms of accountability to objectives and performance standards for the roughly \$50 billion dollars it appropriates every year in the surface transportation program. Instead of giving states a “blank check” to build bridges to nowhere and highways that enable sprawled development, federal funding should come with clear expectations that it will be used to meet the national purpose of the transportation program. Given the urgency of global climate change and the share of admissions generated by the transportation sector (at least 30 percent), one of the goals of the nation’s transportation program should be to reduce carbon emissions by reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT).

It may appear that the two objectives I’ve described – (1) creating capacity for population and economic growth and (2) reducing carbon emissions by reducing VMT – are in conflict. But I do not believe that they are. America can accommodate a significant share of its growth by coordinating land use and transportation decisions in metropolitan regions to provide greater transportation choices, more vibrant communities, less time spent sitting in traffic, and a healthier environment. But to do so, the formulas and structure of the transportation program that favor road building over transit and require metropolitan regions of millions of people to go begging to their state capitols for adequate funding, must change. In short, we need radical reform that attaches expectations to federal funding and more tools, resources, and authority to metropolitan regions.

Challenges in Metropolitan and Megaregions

Nationally, metropolitan areas and megaregions must contend with the greater movement of goods and people within and among their regions. The key to accommodating this rising mobility is to provide greater choice and modal options for each trip. At the megaregion scale, in the Northeast for example, this means investing in Amtrak’s Northeast Corridor to improve the efficiency, frequency and reliability of intercity rail service.

Improvements in intercity rail can help offset regional air travel, which is growing at the rate of 7 percent a year, and clogs airport runways because of the short, frequent and

small nature of these flights. Rail trips are more energy efficient than air travel, emit fewer carbon dioxide emissions, and connect directly to public transportation networks in the heart of central cities.

Nationally, we should be investing in and developing intercity rail corridors of up to 500 miles in length to promote attractive alternatives to air and road travel. Funding for intercity rail should not go through a separate authorization and appropriations process, but should be integrated in the surface transportation bill to facilitate greater coordination among modes and more options for intercity travel. While we support the creation of new, high-speed rail corridors on separate rights-of-way, it is important to note that simply providing frequent, reliable, “higher” speed service of 110 mph in dense corridors would result in major increases in ridership.

Within metropolitan regions, we must continue to invest in our public transportation systems as economic development tools. Our metropolitan regions can accommodate the projected increases in population in this country if we focus density near transit to support healthy lifestyles and a healthy environment. There are 900 transit stations in the New York region; all should and could be focal points for development and smart growth.

The New York region boasts the highest use of public transit anywhere in the country (68% of the region uses public transit compared to 9% in the rest of the country). And yet our systems are struggling because of a history of taking on debt to cover operating costs and a lack of funding for capital improvements to expand capacity in the region. The New York region’s ability to grow and prosper is dependent on completing capacity-expanding projects such as the Second Avenue Subway, East Side Access and Access to the Region’s Core. The construction of Moynihan Station and the overhaul of the existing Penn Station will also encourage increased ridership by re-creating a glorious public space and vastly improved facilities for regional commuters and riders along Amtrak’s vital Northeast Corridor.

History has shown that as public authorities have invested in the safety, efficiency and operation of their systems, the public has responded by riding transit more often. In New York City, this includes making streets safer for pedestrians and bicycles, providing more bicycle lanes, pricing automobile use in the central business district and using that funding to help support investments in the public transportation system. Bicycling and walking are zero emission modes of transportation and shifting trips to them will help reduce global warming emissions. While not every trip in a metropolitan area can be easily taken on foot or bicycle, these non-motorized modes can link up with transit to provide convenient transportation alternatives to private motor vehicle trips.

We also must continue to maintain our nation’s highways and manage them better by adopting intelligent transportation and pricing systems to manage congestion and traffic incidents. The highways of tomorrow should be high-tech – offering options and different pricing to the users based on traffic flow, incidents, and time of day. Highways should be

connected to networks of commuter rail connected to airports, so that each route provides redundancy and modal choice, and so that fare and toll payments are seamless.

Finally, we must prepare and contend with the major impact of goods movement on our nation's highways. This is a competitiveness issue. In the last 75 years, foreign trade increased from an 11 percent to 27 percent share of our gross domestic product – putting a greater burden on our airports, seaports, and the highways that carry the majority of our goods. This is combined with the trend toward “just in time” delivery, in which retail businesses have consolidated and shifted large parts of their inventory to the trucks traveling on our nation's highways.

To meet these challenges I propose three major initiatives that could begin to shape the next transportation bill to meet the growing needs of our nation's economic regions.

1. **Asset Protection and Performance Initiative:** We need to maintain and upgrade what we built over the last sixty years. Examples of infrastructure failure like the Minneapolis bridge collapse and the more recent bridge failure in Pennsylvania are dangerous and unacceptable. The Federal Government should raise the minimum standards of maintenance on existing highway and public transportation assets and provide the funding to meet those standards. This should be prioritized above funding projects that build new capacity. In addition to promoting state of good repair nationwide, we should provide new tools, resources and training to states, regional entities and local governments to experiment with programs that enhance system performance, such as congestion pricing, greater use of Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS), and innovations that increase ridership, safety, and public information on transit systems.
2. **A National Infrastructure Investment Plan:** In addition to its commitment to maintaining the existing system, the federal government should develop a *national infrastructure investment plan* that will help define and possibly narrow the federal role in transportation. As it applies to transportation, the national infrastructure investment plan should include added capacity in seaports, airports, rail (both passenger and freight), and highway freight corridors that require multi-state, megaregional, or international coordination. This national investment plan should be developed by a bipartisan Commission with members appointed by Congress and the next President and should be driven by a 9-month research and public outreach effort to determine national needs and strategic priorities. Draft legislation for a U.S. Commission on National Infrastructure Investment has been drafted by Congressman Earl Blumenauer (D-OR) and we are working with him to build support for this proposal. The Commission's work would result in a map of national investments and principles that would define the core of the federal transportation program. Federal block grants and/or financing packages to build the components of the system would be administered to suitable alliances of state transportation departments, high-speed rail authorities, metropolitan transit agencies, and public- private partnerships.
3. **Metropolitan Mobility Starts:** A new federal program should be established that focuses on providing additional resources, tools, flexibility and capacity building in

the nation's metropolitan planning organizations and transportation agencies. This initiative would target new capacity needs in metropolitan regions, tying federal funding more directly to meeting national objectives, such as VMT reduction, but with greater flexibility about how those objectives are met to encourage innovation and modal choice. Rather than make funding tied to specific modes, the federal government could provide incentives to meet goals such as: coordinating transportation investments with regional land use plans, reducing VMT, improving safety, accessibility, and improving air quality.

Conclusion

There is no more suitable role for the federal government than to chart the direction of the nation's future growth with long-term investments in infrastructure that will promote economic prosperity, a healthy environment and the freedom of movement across the nation's rich landscape. Given the constraints we face with respect to global climate change and our dependence on foreign oil, the federal government should strongly support the transition of the transportation system to less combusive technologies and more energy efficient and human-powered transportation choices. These choices are most possible in the nation's metropolitan areas where economic activity and people are concentrated and where more tools, resources, and policies are needed to direct investments to these areas.